

Conservation & Resource Management

George Hopkin
Director



The Conservation and Resource Management Division assists Utah's agricultural producers in caring for and enhancing our state's precious and vast natural resources. Division programs provide financial, informational and technical assistance to farmers and ranchers for conservation or resource improvement projects.

Agricultural Loan Programs

The division is responsible for several loan programs to help the agriculture community and others achieve various worthwhile goals for productivity, efficiency and environmental benefits for the people of Utah. At present the division has portfolios totaling nearly than one thousand loans with total assets of more than \$35 million. Loan quality is high with low delinquencies and a history of minimal losses. The Loans Section cooperates with two separate divisions of the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) in managing one loan program, and assisting in administering another. Cooperation with other departments of government provides for greater efficiency with minimized duplication of effort and provides the taxpayers with more efficiency in government. The existing programs are:

Agriculture Resource and Development Loans (ARDL)

This program was established in 1976 and has the largest portfolio. This program consists of about 900 loans and has assets of more than \$27 million. The program is managed by the division for the Utah Soil Conservation Commission in cooperation with the soil conservation districts throughout the State. The purpose of the program is to finance conservation projects for land owners to provide for greater efficiencies in agriculture operations, range improvements, water and soil conservation, disaster assistance and environmental quality. The loans carry a maximum term of twelve years at three percent interest and include a four percent administration fee that goes directly to the Utah Association of Conservation Districts (UACD) to help finance their operations. Loans are funded out of a revolving fund that grows through its net income each year. The program has contributed to the State's economy and environment by providing millions of dollars for irrigation systems and other projects that have been particularly valuable during the recent drought. Producers who receive federal grant money to partially finance conservation projects often use the program to finance their cost share portion.

Rural Rehabilitation Loan Programs

These programs, funded by both State and federal monies, total about \$7.9 million and consist of about 75 loans. The various purposes of the loans are to provide assistance to producers with financial problems with various causes, to assist beginning farmers to obtain farmland and, sometimes, to help provide financing for transfer of ownership of family farms and ranches from one generation to another. They are essentially loans of last resort

requiring that applicants be declined by conventional commercial lenders. Terms range up to a maximum of ten years with amortization of greater terms. Interest rates charged have been five percent or less. These low cost, long term real estate loans have helped numerous Utah agricultural operations remain in business.

Petroleum Storage Tank (PST) Loans

This program, which originated in 1996 to meet a 1998 deadline for remediation of underground petroleum storage tanks is managed for a division of DEQ. Loans are made to property owners who have underground storage tanks that require removal, replacement or other accepted procedures. The portfolio consisted of more than 60 loans totaling about \$2 million but has since declined due to slower demand. Loans range in size up to \$45,000 for a maximum ten year term at three percent interest.

The division is also working with the State Revolving Fund (SRF) under DEQ's Division of Water Quality to underwrite and book loans to finance projects for eliminating or reducing non point source water pollution on privately owned lands.

Conservation Easements

The Loans Section is responsible for monitoring compliance of conservation easements held by the Department of Agriculture and Food. Presently the Department holds ten easements on various agriculture properties statewide. The purpose of the easements is to provide an incentive for land owners to voluntarily preserve their properties in agricultural pursuits with a resulting benefit to society through production of food and preservation of open space and/or historically significant properties. The environmental benefits include reduced development, preservation of soil and water resources and wildlife habitat.

Soil Conservation Programs

The soil conservation section helps enable Utah's private land managers to protect and enhance their soil, water and related natural resources. Agricultural managers are the majority holders of private lands and water rights in the state. Their positive land and water management actions result in many short and long-term public benefits. This section strives to help create a political environment where representatives of private land managers can direct the local state national land and watershed conservation and development programs in a voluntary, incentive based process.

This section provides staff support to the Utah Soil Conservation Commission (USCC), which is chaired by the Commissioner of the Dept of Agriculture and Food. This Commission is a policy making body of the state that coordinates, develops and supports soil and water conservation initiatives and programs. The USCC directs financial and administrative support

to Utah's 38 Soil Conservation Districts (SCD). These districts are local units of government charged by state law to help private land managers protect soil, water and related natural resources. This Commission and the districts work closely with their conservation partners, especially state and federal natural resource agencies, to help solve land and water resource challenges.

The USCC and the Department assisted the SCDs and their core conservation partner the USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) carry out the first phases of a detailed statewide natural resource assessment this past fiscal year. The SCDs helped provided outreach to their communities of the condition of their natural resources through public meetings and surveys wherein they asked participants to prioritize the problems and needs their natural resources. The results of this assessment will be used by NRCS to allocate natural resource improvement federal grants in the coming years. The assessments will also be the foundation for the updating of the SCDs long range plans.

The USCC working through the Department has on going memoranda agreements and contractual arrangements with the SCD's state association, the Utah Association of Conservation Districts (UACD), to provide administrative support to the districts and technical assistance to private land owners. These funds are used with other grants mostly from federal agencies to hire staff support which increased during this past fiscal year to more the 33 full-time-equivalents located throughout the state. See <http://www.uacd.org/> to learn more about UACD. Technical assistance provided by UACD and the SCDs augment the support that has historically been provided by the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) agency. Project planning, implementation and resource protection applied to the land is tracked and documented.

During this fiscal year the USCC and the UACD started a project with collaboration with the State Auditor's Office professionals to help the SCDs improve their financial management and accountability as they gain more. Several training session have been carried out and more are planned.

Section 319—Nonpoint Source Pollution Control

Air quality is an emerging environmental issue being addressed by UDAF. EPA had worked mainly with large Eastern animal production interests in developing rules that generally presume guilt on the part of producers by assessing fines based upon operation size that generate revenue for research activities. Division personnel are working with Utah's producer groups and other agricultural interests to address this developing situation in a manner that parrots as much as possible the very successful Utah Concentrated Animal Feeding Operation (CAFO) Strategy that addressed livestock operation water quality.

The CAFO strategy continues to bring Utah's animal feeding operations into water quality compliance. Cooperators are given the opportunity to address any potential water quality problems using resources and methods that they choose to utilize. Sources for assistance include AFO grants as well as ARDL loans administered by the Division.

The agricultural portion of Utah's EPA NPS implementation grant (Section 319 of the CWA) continues to reap important gains

in water quality statewide. Stream stabilization, range and riparian rehabilitation, and irrigation water management join animal waste management as the principle methods. Watersheds such as the San Pitch River and the San Rafael tributaries are emulating the success of many other watersheds in the state. Local steering committees direct the efforts and resources so that water quality success is most effective and something that participants can be especially proud of.

Nonpoint Source Information and Education

The Utah Department of Agriculture and Food continues to administer the agricultural and information and education portions of the state's nonpoint source (NPS) pollution control program, which is funded through section 319 of the Clean Water Act.

The cornerstone of the outreach efforts continues to be the bimonthly news publication, Utah Watershed Review, which is a resource for land owners, as well as state, local and federal government employees working on NPS issues or watershed projects.

UDAF continues to lead the efforts to put on the annual Utah Nonpoint Source Conference. The 2004 conference was held at Ruby's Inn at Bryce Canyon National Park and featured a tour of the Upper Sevier Watershed project. The 2005 edition of the conference will be held in Salt Lake City and will focus on both agricultural and urban impacts from water pollution.

UDAF's NPS I&E program also specializes in video production. In August 2004, work was finished on Managing Manure, a video and publication about the successes of the Utah Concentrated Animal Feeding Operation Committee's strategy to manage polluted runoff from animal feeding operations in Utah.

State Ground Water Program

The Department's agricultural groundwater, well testing program continues to grow and flourish. An electronic version of the annual report about the program is available on the Department's web site: <http://ag.utah.gov/conservation/groundwater.html>.

In 2004, the groundwater-sampling program collected more than 400 samples mostly from UACD Zones 1 and 2 (northern Utah). To meet the increasing demand from citizens throughout the state a rotational sampling program has been implemented. Each year one or two UACD zones will be selected as the primary sampling area. It is planned that the program will service the entire state in a five year period and then repeat. This means that each UACD Zone will be sampled at least every five years.

Samples were tested for a variety of parameters including electrical conductivity, temperature, pH, hardness, sodium and bacteria. Bacteria continue to be a problem throughout the state with 33 percent of the sampled wells and springs being contaminated with coliform bacteria. The program educates well owners individually and in public meetings as to proper procedures for well maintenance and sanitation. High salinity or Total Dissolved Solids (TDS) is the most prevalent groundwater quality issue in the state. Well owners are instructed through the individual well reports on how to handle this issue.

Colorado River Basin Salinity Control Program

Basin States Funding

The “Basin States” portion of the Colorado River Basin Salinity Control Program generates funds from the basin states to help reduce salt loading to the Colorado River. UDAF manages around \$2 million each year in this program to encourage improved irrigation practices in the Uintah Basin and Price San Rafael River basin. This program has grown significantly from the first \$350,000 in 1997. The state of Utah through this program in 2005 hosted sixteen salinity scientists from Australia as they toured Utah’s agricultural and range areas. Information on how to manage salinity was shared and lasting bonds for future collaboration were established.

Utah during this past year has instituted a “salinity credit” program. This program will allow industry to participate in the salinity program by purchasing salt credits to offset salinity discharges. Industry will not be overly restricted in their economic growth and the Colorado River will be protected because of this program. The program will provide \$1.6 million to improve irrigation in the Carbon County area with the first contract signed.

The irrigation projects are an economic boost to agriculture in the two basins. Because of the increased efficiencies of the new systems farmers are able to raise higher valued crops and have more uniform production. This program is a great benefit for the entire state.

Rangeland Monitoring Program

The importance of the Rangeland Monitoring Program has been demonstrated as the state has been through five to seven years of drought. Data collected by the program has documented forage losses. This helps managers and producers have advance warning to obtain other feed sources. During this drought the rangelands of the state have been impacted severely particularly those with sagebrush. The program has been able to document these impacts and assist range managers. The rangeland-monitoring program now has its annual reports from 1996 to 2004 available in hardcopy, on CD-ROM and on the Internet (<http://wildlife.utah.gov/range/>). During 2004 the focus was on the southeastern region of the state. This includes all or parts of San Juan, Grand, Uintah, Duchesne, Carbon, Emery, Wayne, and Garfield counties.

The rangeland monitoring program has developed a new tool for estimating range condition. Range condition has always been subjective; this tool uses data collected by the monitoring team and will be valuable for rangeland managers. The tool can be applied to historic data so that comparisons through time can be evaluated. Because of interest and cooperative successes of this program, UDAF is planning future expansion into range land partnerships and management.



The Division of Conservation and Resource Management helps farmers and ranchers improve the quality of their grazinglands, and thereby helping the state's important livestock industry.